

# 1.

## ABSOLUTE (METAPHYSICAL)

S PINOZA DOES NOT talk about “the Absolute” in the nominative sense that the German Idealists will use later, but he consistently uses the adjective (*absoluta/e*) and adverb throughout his works. For Spinoza, something is “absolute” in a metaphysical sense when it is considered without relation to anything else.

For example, in his early writings Spinoza holds that when the intellect forms ideas absolutely it does so “without attending to other thoughts” (TIE[108]); that God is “not a remote cause absolutely” but “only in respect to things which do not depend on him immediately” (KVDial2[2]); and that “the human Soul, is not thought absolutely, but only a thought determined in a certain way according to the laws of thinking nature” (Ep24).

But it’s in the *Ethics* where “absolute” finds its most significant metaphysical role. That work includes nearly 100 instances of “absolute,” 52 in Part 1 alone. First of all, the concept is crucial for Spinoza’s account of modes. Existing as a “finite” mode requires “in part, a negation” by another finite mode; Spinoza contrasts this with existence affirmed “absolutely” (E1p8s2), that is, not in relation to any other thing. Further, modes follow either from the “absolute nature” of an attribute or from that nature as affected by another mode (E1p21–23). Only infinite modes can follow from the absolute nature of an attribute; finite modes require for their existence an infinite series of prior modifications of an attribute (E1p28).

Secondly, and most importantly perhaps, Spinoza characterizes God as “an absolutely infinite being” (E1def6). To explain what should be understood by this formulation, Spinoza introduces a distinction between “infinity” and “absolute infinity”:

if something is only infinite in its own kind [*in suo genere*], we can deny [*negare*] infinite attributes of it; but if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence [*quicquid essentiam exprimit et negationem nullam involvit*]. (E1def6exp)

A merely “infinite” being is unlimited under a given attribute (i.e., unlimited in its “kind” of being), such as Thought or Extension, but limited in relation to possessing other kinds of being. In contrast, to be “absolutely” infinite is to be unlimited *both* under each attribute and in terms of the number of attributes that express that thing’s being. Something can be infinite in its kind, as a thinking thing for example, but unless it is also expressed under all other attributes, it will not be “absolutely” infinite. Correspondingly, an “absolutely infinite intellect” (Ep63) is one that veridically thinks a being under all attributes.

Spinoza’s account of “absolutely infinite being” in terms of its possession of all the attributes is consistent with his use of “absolute” to refer to something considered without relation to anything else, noted earlier in this entry. For the existence of something that is absolutely infinite by definition rules out the possibility of any other thing existing. However, other

interpretative puzzles remain. One is whether or not “absolute infinity” is to be understood *numerically*, that is, as the claim that substance has infinitely *many* attributes, or *qualitatively*, as the claim that whatever attribute is possible, substance has it. The latter but not the former reading is compatible with substance being absolutely infinite and yet having only two attributes.

A second puzzle bears on what exactly Spinoza understands by an essence that “involves no negation” (of anything, i.e., of reality under any attribute). Two competing interpretations have been put forward. First, it has been suggested that an essence that involves no negation is completely *undetermined* (Joachim 1901, 44; Wolfson 1934, 116). This reading is supported by Spinoza’s characterization of God as “absolutely indeterminate and perfect” in Ep36 and his suggestion in Ep50 that “determination is negation,” that is, that “the determination of a thing does not pertain to its being but rather to its non-being” (Shein 2018a, 445). Many of Spinoza’s Idealist readers have emphasized this picture of Spinozistic being as purely positive. Note that such a reading doesn’t present a problem for the possibility of conceiving of substance: “determination” in Spinoza’s narrow, technical sense of “negation” (as opposed to the generic sense of “determination” as the having of *some* qualitative character) isn’t necessary for conceiving of substance contentfully, since any attribute suffices for conceiving of God. Each attribute is “an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature” (Ep8s1).

However, there are at least two problems with this interpretation of absolute infinity as complete indeterminacy. First, Spinoza’s own “explanation” of his definition of God seems to license treating attributes as “determinate” insofar as “we can deny infinite attributes of” each attribute (E1def6exp). (Thought, for example, is determinate insofar as we can deny Extension of it.) Second, this interpretation of “absolute infinity” as indeterminacy highlights the difficulty, stressed by the Idealists, of understanding how infinite modifications can necessarily follow from God’s essence (Ep16d). The problem is that at least *some* of these modifications – namely, all *finite* modes – by definition involve determination (E1def2). This leaves the derivation of the possibility of negation from a purely affirmative essence unexplained.

Alternatively, it has been proposed that an essence that “involves no negation” involves every possible determination (Douglas 2022; Melamed 2012c, 182). A determination is a negation insofar as it limits a thing, but a being that possesses *all* possible determinations is not characterized by any negation or limit. As Douglas puts it, “Being triangular, for instance, is a limitation insofar as it prevents the triangular thing from being square, or circular, or some other shape. . . . God, in his absolute superdeterminacy, can be triangular and square and circular, and so on” (2022). Under this reading each attribute is a determination of the *whole* essence of God, and hence numerically identical to it. By transitivity, it follows that attributes are numerically identical.

There is, however, one potential objection that can be raised against this interpretation. Spinoza posits that “The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it” (Ep9). Crucially, he also holds that “the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more powers it has, of itself, to exist” (Ep11s), a claim that is consistent with his view that the essence, existence (Ep20), and power (Ep34) of a substance are numerically identical. This suggests that for Spinoza a substance with all attributes has more powers and existence than a substance that has only one attribute – an asymmetry that is reflected by his distinction between absolutely infinite and merely infinite substances. And one could argue that the relevance of this distinction, together with the fact that he dedicates one proposition to explain

why the absolutely infinite substance is indivisible (E1p13), are more fully acknowledged if we think of attributes as numerically distinct, rather than as actual determinations of the *whole* essence of the same substance (Salgado Borge 2022, 997).

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#### KEY PASSAGES

E1def6; E1p9; E1p11d; E1p13; E1p29. Ep24.

#### RECOMMENDED READING

Douglas, A. X. (2022). Spinoza's theophany: The expression of God's nature by particular things. *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, 11(2), 49–69.

Melamed, Y. Y. (2012). *Omnis determinatio est negatio*: Determination, negation, and self-negation in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. In E. Förster & Y. Melamed (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism* (pp. 175–96). Cambridge University Press.

Salgado Borge, A. (2022). Spinoza on essence constitution. *Philosophia*, 50, 987–99.

Schmaltz, T. (1997). Spinoza's mediate infinite mode. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 35(2), 199–235.

Shein, N. (2018). Not wholly finite: The dual aspect of finite modes in Spinoza. *Philosophia*, 46, 433–51.

#### RELATED TERMS

Attribute; Determination; Essence; Existence; Infinity and Finitude; Negation and Privation; Will

## 2.

# ABSOLUTE (POLITICAL)

IN SPINOZA'S METAPHYSICS, “absolute” (*absolute/a*) is a term reserved for God and the whole of nature. In the TP, Spinoza applies the term “absolute” to states, noting that democracy is the “most absolute” form of state (TP11.1). Some critics have puzzled over Spinoza's apparent embrace of absolutism and his arguments for democracy since the notion of collective power seems contrary to an absolute concentration of power.

In the history of political thought, “absolutism” and “constitutionalism” are two opposing views about the sources and limits of legitimate political power. Constitutionalists argue that there must be limits on the power of rulers, while absolutists argue that the power of a state must be concentrated in an individual or an assembly. Spinoza enters this debate with an unusual angle. While absolutists and constitutionalists differ over the location and limits of legitimate power, Spinoza is arguably not concerned with political legitimacy (Den Uyl 2000, xi). He is concerned with power. “Absolute” is the term Spinoza gives to the most powerful state, identifying it with *summa potestas*, another term for “sovereignty” (TP2.17).